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ABSTRACT

The three principal choices in primary and secondary education include home schooling, attendance at private schools, and attendance at public schools nearest the home. However, parents feel that more options are necessary, due to the inadequacy of particular public schools or the need for educational programs not offered in public schools. Thus, educators have proposed other programs, such as magnet schools, work-based attendance, and voucher systems. But magnet schools and work-based attendance provide little choice, and some educators fear that voucher systems would result in instability. Another schooling option is the open enrollment policy of the Minneapolis Public Schools, which offers a wide array of programs. This policy is most effective in a district with a large population. (RG)

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CHOICE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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CHOICE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In the U.S., parents are limited to three basic options when deciding how they want their children to be educated at the primary and secondary grade levels: (1) home schooling, (2) paying tuition to send their children to private schools, or (3) sending their children to the public schools closest to their homes.

Many parents, however, would like these options to be expanded, and some educators are proposing means of making more options available.

Why are parents wanting more schooling options?

The reasons vary considerably from family to family. Some parents simply feel that the particular public schools closest to their homes are not doing a good job. Others are interested in specific educational programs not available in their neighborhood schools. And many parents who send their children to private schools resent paying tuition for those schools *and* paying taxes to support public schools that their children do not attend.

What proposals have educators advanced to give parents a greater say in how and where their children will be educated?

Such proposals include magnet schools, work-based attendance, voucher systems, and open enrollment.

Magnet schools offer special programs not available at traditional schools and are open to students from throughout the school district.

Work-based attendance is a plan by which parents could elect to send their child to a school near either parent's workplace instead of a school close to their home.

A wide range of voucher systems have been proposed. In all such systems, tax money is furnished directly to parents in the form of vouchers they can use to pay tuition at the school they want their child to attend. Some proposals would limit parents to using vouchers at schools within their own districts; others would be statewide in scope. Some would limit voucher use to public schools; others would permit parents to use vouchers at any school they wish--public or private, secular or religious.

Open enrollment plans are discussed in a later section.

What are the principal drawbacks of magnet schools, work-based attendance, and voucher systems?

Magnet schools have generally met with approval, but it can be argued that the magnet school concept doesn't go far enough. Usually a school district offers only one magnet school at any given grade level. Parents who are unhappy with their local school and with what that one magnet school has to offer are out of luck.

Much the same can be said about work-based attendance. A choice among three different schools isn't much of a choice if all three are traditional schools teaching the same subject matter and using the same pedagogical methods.

Voucher proposals have met with strong opposition from teachers' associations, administrators, some educators, and some members of minority groups. Teachers and administrators worry about the instability that could result if parents shopped around the district or even the state when choosing schools for their children. Some educators also fear the possibility of charlatans setting up low quality private schools to make money out of vouchers. And some members of minority groups are concerned lest middle-class white parents use vouchers as a means of pulling their children out of desegregated schools.

One proposal that seems quite promising and has generally worked out well where it has been tried is open enrollment.

What is open enrollment?

Essentially, open enrollment is a policy allowing parents to select from among a variety of school programs. The Minneapolis Public Schools provide an example of how such a policy works.

Prior to the 1982-83 school year,

Minneapolis supported a wide range of school programs but lacked a coherent policy to ensure that all families within the district had equal access to all programs. To remedy the problem, Minneapolis adopted an open enrollment policy.

In March 1982, a guide to the programs available in the district was mailed to every student's home, together with a card on which the parents could indicate their preference. Those preferences determined the number of sites allocated for each program. To ease transportation problems, the city was divided into three geographic areas, with parents sending their children to a school within their geographic area offering the program they desired. However, for single-site programs (such as the Montessori school and the magnet high schools), enrollment was on a districtwide basis. After enrollment projections for the various schools were available, the teachers, in order of seniority, bid for the jobs they wanted for which they were qualified.

What are the benefits and drawbacks of an open enrollment policy?

The obvious benefit is that, properly administered, an open enrollment policy appears to accomplish what parents and educators want: It provides parents with a wide range of programs from which to choose, and it does so without raising the constitutional issues of church-state separation that arise when the government subsidizes religious schools.

At the same time, open enrollment is not a panacea. It becomes almost meaningless if all a district has to offer is a choice among several schools that teach the same subjects in the same ways. Open enrollment would appear to be most meaningful in a district with a large population base and the capacity to develop a wide range of programs.

It could be argued that open enrollment might promote the kind of instability feared by critics of the voucher system. It appears, however, that when parents are given the opportunity to choose from among a number of programs, they usually stay with their original choices.

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